

Lithuanian-Americans React With Joy After 50-Year Wait

By SUZANNE DALEY

A party in Chicago for a local Lithuanian-language radio program on Sunday erupted into a more spontaneous celebration. Just minutes earlier, Lithuania had proclaimed itself free of the Soviet Union.

"People started applauding and, almost as if on cue, they stood up and started singing the Lithuanian national anthem," said Daiva Meile, who was among the guests. "There was euphoria — such a sense of pride."

By yesterday, Ms. Meile said, much of the elation in Chicago's large Lithuanian community had cooled to concern, as the Soviet President, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, struck a stern note, calling Lithuania's declaration of independence "illegitimate and invalid." The concerns of Chicago's Lithuanians were echoed in several of the country's other Lithuanian communities.

Ms. Meile, a spokeswoman for the American Lithuanian Council, a group founded in 1940 to seek Lithuania's independence, said many Lithuanian-Americans were beginning to realize that there would probably be difficult times ahead for their motherland.

'Not Going to Be Easy'

"We've begun to sense that it is not going to be easy," Ms. Meile said. "We do not doubt that it will happen. But it's going to take years of negotiating with the Soviet Union — hopefully negotiating."

"More than anything, I think people are worried about the possibility of economic sanctions," she said, adding that almost all of Lithuania's electricity, gas and coal in Lithuania comes from the Soviet Union. "To cut that off would be really a hardship."

The nationalist spirit that has motivated Lithuania to be the first among the states of the Soviet Union to declare independence has been nurtured by a number of factors, experts on Baltic affairs say. Among them are a homogeneous population, a strong Roman Catholic faith and a long history of rebellion against foreign rule.

"In the 19th century under the oppression of the czars, Lithuanians were

not even allowed to speak their own language," said Asta Banionis, the director of governmental affairs for the Lithuanian-American Community Inc., a group that seeks to foster and maintain Lithuania's heritage and culture. "There developed a whole underground for books."

Differences With Baltic Neighbors

Others point to a number of distinctions between Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors to the north, Estonia and Latvia.

After 50 years of domination by the Soviet Union, both Estonia and Latvia now have large numbers of Russians and others of non-Baltic descent, who were attracted by industrialization and better living in the Baltics or sent there by Moscow, or both.

But Lithuania, with a population larger than that of its two Baltic neighbors, has a higher percentage of people of Lithuanian descent — about 80 percent, compared with a population about 60 percent Estonian in Estonia and around 50 percent Latvian in Latvia.

Also, the Catholic church also never lost its grip on the population, experts say. It operated in secret for years, providing a framework for rebellion.

Church 'Gave Them Strength'

"It gave, throughout, a structure and a moral basis to hold together some sort of political alienation," said Martha Olcott, a professor at Colgate University who is an expert on the region. "The church is part of their lives; they maintained secret churches. It gave them strength."

Some Lithuanian-Americans expressed disappointment with the Bush Administration, saying they wished the President would take a more aggressive stance in the matter.

In the East New York section of Brooklyn yesterday, Cornelius Bucnys, the editor of a Lithuanian-language weekly, Darbininkas, was preparing today's issue. In it he calls for Lithuanian-Americans to write to Congress and to President Bush, urging that they strongly support Lithuanian independence.